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# Emotions, international hierarchy, and the problem of solipsism in Sino-US South China Sea politics

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## Abstract

This study offers an explanation for Beijing's seemingly self-defeating approach to the South China Sea that distances China ever more from the regional and international communities which it wants to lead and join while drawing in the foreign military presence that it seeks to keep at a distance. Combining recent research on the role of emotions and on hierarchy in international politics, this article shows how the powerful narrative of national 'humiliation' and 'rejuvenation' has informed Chinese maritime politics. As the South China Sea became incorporated in the linear timeline of China's 5000 year civilizational history, the US' and its allies' push-back against Beijing's territorial claims deepened China's ideational isolation. The ensuing state of solipsism increases the risk of violent confrontations.

## Keywords

China, emotions, international hierarchy, South China Sea, trauma, United States

## Introduction

In November 2012, Xi Jinping, the newly elected General-Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and Chairman of the Central Military Commission led the other six members of the Politburo Standing Committee through the National Museum at Tiananmen Square. The highly symbolic visit by the party-state's inner circle provided the setting for the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong to renew the Party's pledge to fulfil its historical mission and make China great again. Walking through the Road of Rejuvenation permanent exhibition, Xi reportedly paid special attention to exhibits on the First Opium War (1840–2) and to charts illustrating the humiliating history of 'how

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the West had occupied China's territories, established concessions and carved-out spheres of influence'.<sup>1</sup> Media reports also emphasized him looking at photos of the Central Committee session at which Deng Xiaoping launched the 'epoch-making reform and opening up drive'. In the subsequent speech *The Road Towards Renewal*, touted as 'a retrospective on the Chinese nation, a celebration of its present and a declaration on its future', Xi reminded his countrymen and women that 'the Chinese nation had suffered unusual hardship and sacrifice in the world's history' and pointed out that 'the Chinese people have never given in, have struggled ceaselessly, and have finally taken hold of their own destiny and started the great process of building the nation'.<sup>2</sup>

This speech and media coverage not only located China but also every Chinese citizen on the linear timeline of development such as it continues to constitute international hierarchy. Referring 'to the country's hard-earned finding of a correct road towards rejuvenation and its remarkable achievements', that is China climbing upwards in the hierarchy, Xi also cited from a poem: 'I will mount a long wind some day and break the heavy waves'. The state-guided media clarified that 'after more than 170 years of hard struggle since the Opium War, the Chinese nation has bright prospects, is closer than ever to reaching its goal of great renewal'.<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis on the trauma of 'national humiliation' and the hope for and path towards 'rejuvenation', including the allusion to the seas, proved to be highly consequential. In early 2015, media reports revealed that China had been engaged in large-scale land reclamation and reinforced several of the disputed reefs and rocks in the Spratly area of the South China Sea.<sup>4</sup> Predictably, the clandestine manner and unprecedented scale – fleets of dredging ships had been constructing a 'great wall of sand'<sup>5</sup> through the enlargement of no less than seven features including major runways and harbours – elicited widespread condemnation. Not only the rival claimants of Vietnam and the Philippines but also US, Japanese, and Australian policy-makers decried the Chinese move as provocative, violating international laws and norms, and thereby undermining the 'rules-based international order'.<sup>6</sup> Highly publicized and in line with its long-standing practice,<sup>7</sup> the US Navy intensified so-called Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the South China Sea,<sup>8</sup> and the Japanese government dispatched submarines and large helicopter carriers to Southeast Asia with the intention of 'sending strong messages'.<sup>9</sup> Much to the Chinese government's dismay, the G-7 leaders repeatedly criticized Beijing's behaviour too.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Xi administration managed in a few years to bring about the opposite of Beijing's principal strategic objectives: To be recognized as a peacefully developing, responsible member of the international community, and to safeguard China's sovereignty by keeping foreign, especially US forces, at a distance.

How is this seemingly self-defeating course of action by a leadership that is deemed exceptionally apt in strategic thinking and policy-making explainable? Why did the Chinese government deliberately follow a policy line that would arouse widespread concerns, condemnation, and in turn rekindle Chinese leaders' and people's feelings of national humiliation? Answers to these questions not only address the empirical question how far the Chinese leadership may be ready to go in defending its claims. The examination of Sino-US South China Sea politics also provides a case for the study of collective memory and of emotions through the linking of trauma with a specific instance of international hierarchy.

The present study suggests that international hierarchy centred on 'Western' international community of developed and democratic states made it difficult for the non-Western, underdeveloped and communist-party-ruled China collectively, and people in China individually, to communicate grief that stems from past violence and thus obstructed the re-construction of new identities. The national trauma, manifest in the discourse of 'national humiliation', persists despite rapidly increasing material power and deepens China's ideational insulation. Thus, international hierarchy spurs the Communist Party's continuing quest for national 'rejuvenation' by making China the Maritime Power (*Haiyang daguo*) that, through its assertiveness, partially reproduces the very memories and feelings of national humiliation that it is supposed to overcome.

The line of argument proceeds in five steps. In the next section, I link recent advancements in the study of emotions in world politics to the constitutional effects of international hierarchy and its effects on Sino-US geopolitics in the South China Sea. Thereafter, I introduce the concept of trauma time as a means to operationalize the role of emotions in hierarchical international politics.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, I revisit the revival of China's 'national humiliation' narrative as an indication for China's unresolved collective traumata. Then, I show how the South China Sea has become an integral part of China's imagined historical trajectory from humiliation to rejuvenation. This insight suggests that the Sino-US geopolitical contest, as discussed in the subsequent section, has been nurturing the national victimization narrative. Last, I point to the problematic dynamic that this emerging ideational isolation or solipsism on the part of China entails.

## Emotions, international hierarchy and the South China Sea

Although the emotion of fear is central to the inquiry into, it is rarely operationalized in studies of contemporary politics.<sup>12</sup> Even though recent scholarship refuted earlier concerns with scientific quality,<sup>13</sup> the predominant view continues to treat actions based on fear, anger, shame, grief, hatred and hope as mere aberrations from the otherwise rational behaviour of the modern subject.<sup>14</sup> Emotions that lead to so-called misperceptions tend to be attributed to the unreasonable 'other' and are seen as the very traits of human behaviour that need to be rooted out; usually through sufficiently strong and well-crafted postures of deterrence. Moreover, few studies have systematically analysed the important role of emotions in (international) politics beyond the Euro-Atlantic.<sup>15</sup> This shortcoming may be pronounced in analyses of Asia-Pacific affairs.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the dimension of international hierarchy is often underappreciated. Likewise, few discussions of international hierarchy make emotions their focus of analysis.<sup>17</sup> This is intriguing given that the defining vocabulary of 'shifting' and 'rising' powers display an emotional 'expression of our vulnerability to events that we don't control'.<sup>18</sup>

International hierarchy engenders a rather contradictory conception China's place in the world. While most outside observers are anxious about an assertively 'rising China' remaking world order according to its own preferences, Chinese policy-makers fear the consequences of being weak; of a China that fails to advance fast enough, remains an outsider to the international community, and consequently faces the prospects of societal disorder, foreign encroachment, and even dismemberment.<sup>19</sup> In Callahan's words, China is a 'pessoptimist' nation.<sup>20</sup> Fear of the future co-exists with hope for a better future, such

as President Xi expounded it in his formulation of the Chinese Dream.<sup>21</sup> It is the CPC's long-standing aspiration to, first, realize a 'moderately well-off society' and second, to become a respected member of the international community.<sup>22</sup> The leadership even set itself and every Chinese person deadlines for achieving them: The former by the centenary of the CPC's founding in 2021 and the latter by the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic in 2049.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the Party sees the first two decades of the twenty-first century as a 'period of strategic opportunity' not to be missed.<sup>24</sup>

Hierarchy conceals these emotions: Those showing emotions are seen as behaving unreasonably and their concerns and claims are, therefore, invalid or insignificant.<sup>25</sup> The dismissal of Chinese emotional reactions as purely instrumental, as the Party's tactical use of nationalism, is a direct outflow of this view.<sup>26</sup> Because deliberately exaggerated and distorted 'facts' will elicit reactions from target audiences and may eventually become commonly held beliefs, also among the very manipulators, it is largely irrelevant whether emotional outbursts are part or results of a propaganda offensive or not. To the contrary, in their desire to portray themselves as strong leaders in control of every situation and contingency, officials will likely tone down the full extent of their individual disapproval and conceal their personal fears through the use of diplomatic jargon. Since escalating maritime conflicts are seen as epitome for how the power shift towards China destabilizes the established 'rule-based order', the South China Sea provides an insightful case for showing 'how exactly [. . .] hierarchies create the trade-offs that (later) shape behavior'.<sup>27</sup>

While clashes between Beijing and Washington are well documented, studies that apply conventional methodologies display great difficulties with explaining the repetition of escalatory 'mistakes' and 'miscalculations', including officials' refusal to use communication hotlines and their clear tendencies to believe in conspiracy theories amid the continuous build-up of antagonistic military postures.<sup>28</sup> Methodologically more critical studies made the strong case for the relevance of deeply entrenched historical narratives, the so-called century of national humiliation in particular, in framing Beijing's interpretations of the international environment and determining foreign and security political responses. Gries, for instance, points to the lasting humiliation that the Chinese leaders and public felt after the US in May 1999 bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.<sup>29</sup> Wang's study shows in detail how these feelings led Chinese decision-makers to interpret the Belgrade bombing as US-led ploy to create chaos and topple the CPC. The same case also strongly supports the argument that China's transformation to a capitalist economy led to a rekindling of national humiliation narratives and pushed leaders such as President Jiang Zemin – known for his personal emotional outbursts upon what he perceived as lack of respect for his country – to put utmost premium at increasing China's status through boosting 'comprehensive national power', that is the twenty-first century version of the 'rich nation strong army' paradigm originally propagated by twentieth century nationalists.<sup>30</sup>

In the same vein as the Belgrade embassy bombing, the collision of a Chinese fighter jet with a US EP-3 reconnaissance plane over the South China Sea that caused the Chinese pilot's death and led to a controversy over the arrest of the US crew after their emergency landing deepened Chinese indignation. The foreign ministry repeatedly asserted that China's national sovereignty and *dignity* should not be violated and insisted

that the American government apologize and take responsibility for the troubles caused to China.<sup>31</sup> Shepperd, explicitly theorizing these emotions, found that while the US sought to bolster their position through references to international law, Chinese leaders and the public alike felt bullied and lamented the US' hegemonic attitude.<sup>32</sup> Noting the use of strongly emotional language and seemingly excessive insistence on a US apology, and recognizing that the 'betrayal' of hitherto practised rules of interaction led the situation deteriorate at 'alarming' speed, she points to the long-standing Chinese fears of encirclement fueled by the narrative of national humiliation. Hutchison goes one analytical step further. Examining the memory politics described by Wang and others, she finds that people in China have been unable to 'act out' their trauma.<sup>33</sup> Yet, while pointing to the crucial role of community in this process, her conclusion stops with a reference to the need for critical reflection. Here, an explicit theorizing of international hierarchy and a discussion of evidence beyond instances of diplomatic crisis management promises deeper insights.<sup>34</sup>

### **Warped trauma time and the linear time of the state**

Experiences are traumatic when they are 'too horrible to be remembered' and to be 'integrated into our symbolic universe'.<sup>35</sup> This is true especially for violence directed at individuals. Victims feel a deep sense of betrayal and loss of trust in their immediate social worlds and, hence, also in their own ability to act as independent agents.<sup>36</sup> As Edkins elaborates, traumatic events reveal the radical contingency of social order. Thrown out of the world that we all take for granted, and unable to make sense of what happened, the victim must not only fear the possible return of violent encounter at any moment, he or she is also unable to communicate the meaning of the painful – unimaginable and unspeakable – experience to others.<sup>37</sup> As a result, it is very difficult for the victim of violence<sup>38</sup> to regain a new understanding and purpose of his or her place in a given social world:

the boundaries of meaning are circumscribed by a frozen picture of the past, which continues to structure interaction with others. Held captive by this picture, the self engages with the world as if past and present were inseparable, and as if the world were her world of trauma'.<sup>39</sup> Being caught in this emotional warp is what Edkins calls 'trauma time'.<sup>40</sup>

The only way to regain a sense of control – or ontological security – leads through the gradual sharing of grief and reflection about the traumatic experiences with others. Others who acknowledge the victim's pain and assist him or her to regain confidence in the self and in their world through the reattribution of meaning to the past, while also directing attention towards reconstructing a new future. In other words, it is necessary to 'encircle' the traumatic experience in order to gradually restore a linear timeline of existence compatible with the social structures of contemporary society.<sup>41</sup>

In a modern society such as the CPC forcefully propagates it, belonging to certain national communities inevitably defines social worlds. Yet, imaginations of linear and therefore reassuringly transcendent accounts of national histories are always precarious. Collective memory is incompatible with the individual memories that it absorbs into

national narratives of common suffering, heroic sacrifice, and redemption or salvation. This tension is especially pronounced when the national community refuses to recognize the victim's grief. Worse, when the community and its representatives are the very perpetrators of violence. Instances of large-scale violence, then, impose a particular strong demand for the assimilation of individual narratives into national narratives. For the national community to remain united, authorities must provide an instant and credible story about the causes for past suffering and embed it into the community's journey to the prosperous future: the linear time of the state.<sup>42</sup>

In this way, the aforementioned Road to Rejuvenation exhibition creates the depoliticizing time of the state.<sup>43</sup> In China's case, it is the time of the (Han-)civilizational state.<sup>44</sup> Chinese history is narrated as a linear path that starts with the Qin dynasty. According to official historiography, a peaceful order had been established and laid the foundation for China's prosperity when the first emperor forcibly unified a great number of disparate and incessantly warring kingdoms in 221 BC. The 5000 year march through history culminates with the display of modern China's proud achievements. The steady if not exponential increase of industrial output, the electrification of Chinese households, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) wielding advanced weaponry and participating in United Nations peacekeeping operations, and the successful pushing of civilizational boundaries through the Xuelong ice-breaker's explorations of the polar ice caps, the Jiaolong manned submersible's charting of the deep oceans, and the Long March rockets' supplying the Tiangong space station.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, as the strong insistence on national unity and expedient progress from the 'century of national humiliation' to 'national rejuvenation' amid a successful rekindling of the national victimization narrative suggests, the traumata of past violence have proven hard to overcome. The onslaught of European empires, culminating in the Middle Kingdom's subjugation to previously peripheral Japan from 1931 onwards, features most prominently. While the so-called semi-colonization and the ensuing civil wars shattered the Chinese people's worlds, interstate wars destroyed China's world.<sup>46</sup>

Defeat means a loss of control, or profound ontological insecurity, by the loser over his or her future. It is compounded by the fact that the history of the conflict is written by the victor; the defeated also loses control over the own past.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the victimized or defeated, individually and as a community, respectively, struggle to find the words that can convey their grief and find empathic listeners for their stories about what happened. Consequently, trauma gives rise to a 'hardening of boundaries between self and others, in an attempt to reduce vulnerability'.<sup>48</sup> This can lead to ideational isolation or solipsism. Solipsism denotes the emotional state when an individual, due to a traumatic experience, retreats or flights from a shared reality to an inner world which is only open to comprehension by that individual, who inhabits it all alone: '*the* world and *my* world' becomes to be experienced as 'one and the same thing'.<sup>49</sup>

In such situations, anger and the drive for revenge are often the only available means for restoring the minimum of self-respect and dignity that are required for keeping someone going and avoid him or her falling into self-destructive behaviour.<sup>50</sup> This is because, as Fierke explains, the most important emotion that lies behind anger (and fear) is shame; shame that is often denied because we are 'ashamed of being ashamed'.<sup>51</sup> While shame is directed at oneself, anger is directed at the other: 'the self, unable to acknowledge

painful emotions inside, articulates the problem outward, as betrayal or *humiliation* by another', and 'an Other may reinforce the boundaries separating the isolated self through further denial'.<sup>52</sup> That is, traumatic experiences cause two seemingly contradictory emotional reactions: Shame for being unable to resist someone taking away all that we hold dear, including our own agency and self-respect, and anger at the perpetrated injustice. The former haunts the victim in the form of constant fear of being deprived of agency again, and thus being humiliated once more. The latter spurs the victim into action to prove, especially to the perpetrator and to the self, that the violent acts were wrong and that the self is not to blame. This can only be done if the victim succeeds in restoring agency by finding empathic listeners for his or her story about what happened. Hence, international hierarchy manifests itself not only in an actor's power to take away another's self-respect but also in the capacity to suppress *or* acknowledge another's story.

As we have seen, the CPC under Xi Jinping redoubled its efforts to rectify past injustice and overwrite China's humiliating history – such as it is officially narrated – through achieving a moderately well-off society and regaining recognition as a (responsible) great power until 2021 and 2049, respectively. The present analytical framework is capable of shedding more light on the reasons behind the extraordinary strength and persistence of this motivational structure as it propels China's maritime policies.

## China's recurrent traumata

Mao Zedong's famous declaration in 1949 that 'the Chinese (people) have stood up'<sup>53</sup> did not mean the fulfilment of the CPC's or his personal mission.<sup>54</sup> Despite the downfall of the Japanese Empire and defeat of the rivalling Nationalists, siege mentality, an indication of ideational isolation, continued to hold sway over the Communist leadership. Increasingly paranoid, Mao personally and the party-state leadership collectively, remained caught in their own worlds and suffered great anxiety.<sup>55</sup> Hence, Mao continuously adhered to an aggressive revolutionary stance in both domestic and international politics. Not only did his CPC fail to restore China's linear trajectory towards prosperity and peace beyond national independence, Mao's policies also meant the breaking of countless individual and communal timelines that had persisted or been restored after the civil war had ended in 1949. As China remained isolated even in the communist camp, Mao's zealous modernization drive engendered further traumata.

Disconnected from the reality of ordinary people, the state turned on its citizens: aimed at fast catching-up with Western industrialization, the massive collectivization programmes of the Great Leap Forward led to the premature death of more than 40 million people between 1958 and 1962.<sup>56</sup> This extremely traumatic event in Chinese history engendered a further series of equally disruptive atrocities.<sup>57</sup> When Mao's faction started the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) to purge potential challengers and thereby dismantled the very party-state the CPC had been building, people also turned against one another: students denounced teachers, neighbours accused each other, and even family members allowed the mob to publicly humiliate, expropriate and kill their closest on the grounds of alleged anti-revolutionary mindsets.<sup>58</sup> Thus, people in China suffered the greatest possible – unimaginable and therefore unspeakable – loss of trust in their immediate social worlds.<sup>59</sup>



These traumatic events allowed Deng Xiaoping to embark on the radically different reform and opening-up policy. The subsequent advances in agricultural and industrial development led to incipient prosperity and enabled a great many individuals to rebuild their worlds as they envisioned new, linear trajectories into promising futures. At the same time, Deng's developmental success allowed the Communist Party to reconstruct the linear time of China's path to rejuvenation, including its re-joining of the international community. Yet, forceful economic restructuring combined with the displacement of rural communities for the sake of development stirred public unrest. Deng's fear that protests would lead to a recurrence of chaos and derail China from its developmental track misled him to partially recreate the very traumatic experiences that he sought to avoid when ordering troops to Tiananmen Square in June 1989.<sup>60</sup> The People's Liberation Army's attack on the people could not be integrated in the narrative of China's path to rejuvenation and became taboo. Moreover, the crackdown meant that China was going against the tide of the time. Since it threatened the coherence of the equally linear narrative of the world's inevitable 'Westernizing' and the 'ending of history',<sup>61</sup> the Communist Party leadership became isolated and retreated into siege mentality once more.<sup>62</sup>

Instead of being 'situated within a social world where the painful experience has meaning within a [national as well as international] community such that the bereaved receives the necessary support over time to redefine [their] place in everyday life', much of peoples' grief became 'accompanied by betrayal and isolation' and led to the continuation of trauma.<sup>63</sup> Thus, China's 'rise' coincided with the resurgence of status anxiety and rekindled feelings of victimhood and *national* humiliation.<sup>64</sup> As we have seen, emotions of shame result from memories and corresponding fears of renewed loss of control over the self, and the exposure of that loss in ways that suggest to others and, crucially, also to the victim him or herself, that he or she lacks agency, and potentially deprives him or her of being respected as a human.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, contrary to giving up and turning upon oneself, 'living well is the best revenge'.<sup>66</sup> This approach to overcoming humiliation is not without caveats, though. Because living well depends on industrial development along the ideal of US-led modernization, a repudiation of China's success in following that model may dash the hope of becoming part of the prosperous 'West' and raises the spectre of further humiliation.<sup>67</sup> This is why foreign criticisms pointing at socio-economic problems, which are also seen as likely impediments within China, exacerbate feelings of national humiliation. They confirm pre-existing anxieties and suggest that Chinese leaders could lose control over their country's fate and might be unable to steer it along the linear path of development and national rejuvenation.

These circumstances give rise to a contradictory emotional pattern. The straightening of China's civilizational timeline for overcoming the national trauma requires both successful socio-economic development and foreign recognition. Yet, since the negative appraisal of *rising* China as a threat, especially from the US, brings some recognition as an independent actor in international relations too, development may take precedence over the maintenance of good relations. Hence, China's foreign policy-induced national trauma persists and helps the Party to continue demanding greater sacrifice from the people for the sake of development and national security.<sup>68</sup> From the mid-1990s onwards, this developmental drive came to propel China's pushing of the maritime frontier further into the deep seas.

## The national rejuvenation dream and the South China Sea

The discovery of marine development as a new 'growth engine', in conjunction with the post-Tiananmen patriotic education campaign's emphasis on national victimhood,<sup>69</sup> led to the incorporation of the South China Sea into the 5000 year timeline of the Chinese state. The National Museum's panels pertaining to each of the phases of China's Road to Rejuvenation depict the South China Sea as part of the country ever since 221 BC. Yet, political maps not only create the impression that the nation has always been there, immutably frozen in time and space and therefore reassuringly persistent into the distant future. As Callahan demonstrated, these cartographic representations of China are also highly emotional. They mourn the loss of national territory and are aspirational in that they stake out the territories to be recovered.<sup>70</sup> The Communist Party not only appropriated the infamous nine-dash line drawn by a middle-ranking officer of the rivalling Nationalist Party in the 1930s; they also elevated its safeguarding to a matter of national survival.<sup>71</sup> Increasingly tied to China's (territorial) integrity, this projection of 'newly written borders *backward* in time'<sup>72</sup> morphed into a de facto 'core interests' in a manner that had 'never applied to its land border disputes'.<sup>73</sup>

The strengthening developmental imperative entrenched Chinese leaders' urge to control the seas to the extent that the successful assertion of maritime claims came to be perceived as a precondition for the nation's development, and for achieving the China Dream.<sup>74</sup> In 1998 already, the first White Paper on Marine Development had asserted that ocean development was nothing less than a condition for the success of China's modernization project: 'As a major developing country with a long coastline, China must take exploitation and protection of the ocean as a long-term strategic task before it can achieve the sustainable development of its national economy'.<sup>75</sup> The inclusion of ocean development in the 11th Five-Year Plan of 2006 accelerated efforts to develop the seas, for the stimulation of growth, and for the assertion of international status. This drive experienced another push after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis put millions of migrant workers out of their jobs and prompted the leadership to dispense an enormous \$586 billion stimulus package while introducing new special economic zones.<sup>76</sup> The 12th Five-Year Plan increased emphasis on the marine economy even further and the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) started publishing annual reports on China's Ocean Development.<sup>77</sup> In line with the overall objective to boost comprehensive national power,<sup>78</sup> the blueprint for national development from 2011 to 2015 proclaimed 'the importance of integrated maritime indicators is growing' as a means to avoid being 'left behind' and to 'catch up with worldwide trends'.<sup>79</sup> The state-guided media hailed the marine economy a new 'growth engine',<sup>80</sup> and officials elevated it to a 'strategic level' for China's development.<sup>81</sup> At the same time, during the 18th Party Congress of 2012, the incoming leaders Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang pledged to enhance China's capacity for marine resource exploitation, to safeguard its maritime rights, and to make it a maritime power. The head of the SOA elaborated that a country requires the comprehensive strength to develop, use, protect, control and manage maritime areas.<sup>82</sup> Given the 'complicated' situations, both domestic and international, this strategy appeared to be the only way forward for developing China into a World Power.<sup>83</sup> Subsequent government work reports and policy papers consistently reiterated this emphasis on coordinated ocean development.<sup>84</sup>

China's turn to the seas, the quest to becoming a maritime power, represents the desire to become an industrially advanced country and a respected member of the (Western) international community. Thereby, ocean development restores the linear timeline of the Chinese civilizational state. This is even more important given the persistence of the strongly self-denying view that 'land civilizations', such as China's, have historically been inferior to the 'maritime civilizations' of the 'West' and Japan.<sup>85</sup> As Xie points out, the documentary 'Toward the Sea' aired by the country's main broadcaster in December 2011 reveals this driving force behind (ocean) development. It is reminiscent of the now disgraced 1988 television series *He Shang* [River Elegy]. Particularly the title of its first segment 'Searching for a Dream' had stirred great controversies due to its modernist portrayal of traditional Chinese culture – land-based as opposed to western ocean-based culture – as being backward and the cause for China's underdevelopment. In a display of deep-rooted feelings of shame, it conveyed the message that China must throw its culture overboard, that is negate the self and Westernize to become prosperous and respected (by the 'West' and by itself).

Consequently, the projection of the desire for national development into the maritime sphere means that to renounce maritime territorial claims would be tantamount to give up hope for achieving national modernization and rejuvenation project itself. China's imagined 5000 year trajectory through time would be broken again, or come to an end altogether. This is the context in which specific policies such as new laws aimed at 'protecting' islands through development,<sup>86</sup> including land reclamation in the South China Sea, must be understood.

### **Solipsism and China's future past?**

From Beijing's perspective, China is once again being 'bullied' and must redouble its efforts to overcome 'national humiliation'. Foreign pressure in the East and South China seas all but confirms this rationale.<sup>87</sup> Until recently, it was only a minority of outspoken 'naval nationalists' who voiced this kind of concern.<sup>88</sup> Yet, since around 2008, this view on maritime issues has been spreading. Wang identified three common messages in mass media coverage: 'the alleged theft of resources by foreign countries, a presumed conspiracy of the United States, and a call for stronger positions to confront foreign challenges'.<sup>89</sup> Indicating solipsistic tendencies, China is always portrayed as the victim, not the aggressor. Because these messages have been falling on open ears, positively at home and negatively abroad, it is problematic to distinguish them from the 'real' and ostensibly more rational views of the elites.

Nurtured by a continuous string of seemingly minor but no less publicized incidents emerging from surveillance activities at sea, the national humiliation discourse lost none of its salience, and led to a deepening of China's ideational isolation. In March 2001 already, a Chinese frigate, according to US courses, 'aggressively confronted' an oceanographic survey ship of the US Navy and ordered it to leave the exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>90</sup> In March 2009, a US vessel with a similar task was harassed by five Chinese vessels that 'shadowed and aggressively maneuvered in dangerously close proximity'.<sup>91</sup> In March and May of the same year, this kind of encounters recurred.<sup>92</sup> Each time, the Chinese Foreign Ministry protested vehemently against US protests.<sup>93</sup>

As the action-reaction cycle of negative emotions deepened, wartime history remained ever present and seemingly prone to repeat itself.

As tensions between Beijing and Washington increased, the disconnect between China and its neighbours widened. During the 2010 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers' meeting in Hanoi, successive representatives raised the issue of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Yet, after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – on the background of large-scale US military manoeuvres against North Korea in the Yellow Sea – declared the so-called freedom of navigation in East Asian waters a US national interest, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi reacted furiously. The apparent ganging-up against China prompted him to leave the meeting and return with a passionate speech in which he declared that 'China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact'.<sup>94</sup> For Chinese representatives, criticisms from its neighbours were incomprehensible. Unable to communicate painful historical experiences to the international community, they seemed caught in their own world.

At the same time, Japanese leaders acting in line with the US fueled Chinese feelings of humiliation and fears of containment. Under the impression of a major controversy over maritime territorial delimitation in 2010, Japan's nationalization of some of the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islets in 2012 drew particularly harsh reactions from Beijing. A senior official went as far as warning Japan that 'the indignation of the Chinese people will erupt like a volcano', and the "purchase" would do no less damage to China-Japan relations than an atomic bomb'.<sup>95</sup> Beijing subsequently enhanced patrols at sea and in the air, and declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) to match the existing US-Japanese ADIZ and counter Japan's perceived 'hyping of the China threat'. However, instead of leading to the acknowledgement of China's past suffering and assistance in resisting what Beijing sees as Japan's 'outright denial of the outcomes of victory in the war against fascism' and 'grave challenge to the post-war international order',<sup>96</sup> these moves nurtured the view of China as aggressively expansionist.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, US officials came under heightened pressure to commit to allied defence of the Senkakus.<sup>98</sup>

In Beijing's eyes, foreign attempts to 'shape'<sup>99</sup> or curb China's rise intensified, and mandated robust response. In December 2013, a PLA warship stopped a US guided-missile destroyer from shadowing the Chinese aircraft carrier in the South China Sea<sup>100</sup> and in August 2014, a Chinese fighter jet intercepted a US Navy anti-submarine warfare plane in a move that Pentagon officials called 'unprofessional', 'very dangerous', and 'inconsistent with customary international law'.<sup>101</sup> The prospect of China pushing back by establishing another ADIZ in the South China Sea loomed large, too.<sup>102</sup> Yet, when US Secretary of Defense Hagel accused Beijing of 'destabilising' the South China Sea, and threatening the region's long-term progress,<sup>103</sup> the Chinese representative condemned his as 'a speech which tastes of hegemony, a speech with expressions of coercion and intimidation, a speech with flaring rhetoric that usher destabilizing factors into the Asia-Pacific to stir up trouble, and a speech with unconstructive attitude'.<sup>104</sup>

The confrontation deepened once it became clear that China had been reclaiming large areas in the Spratly group of the South China Sea and was constructing berths and runways capable of hosting major troop contingents. This move invited widespread condemnation. Prime Minister Abe of Japan seemed to be particularly eager for the G-7 leaders to include strong wording in their joint statement.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, Beijing

became more isolated. Despite that the Chinese representative at the 2016 Shangri La symposium, Admiral Sun Jianguo, objected US Secretary of Defense Carter's suggestion that China risked isolating itself, such isolation had already become reality. Sun unintentionally confirmed this when he stated: 'Actually I am worried that some people and countries are still looking at China with the Cold War mentality and prejudice. They may build a wall in their minds and end up isolating themselves', and when he emphasized that 'China will not be bullied, including over a pending international court ruling over its claims in the vital trade route', and asserted that 'we do not make trouble, but we have no fear of trouble'.<sup>106</sup> More trouble came. Washington started highly publicized so-called freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) against the Chinese expansion. Beijing deemed them violations of international law ignoring others' sovereign security and maritime interests, and labelled them as a conduct of maritime hegemony in the name of 'freedom of navigation',<sup>107</sup> that is, an outflow of American exceptionalism.<sup>108</sup> Subsequently, even Chinese scholars known for their liberal stance argued that 'the so called FONOPs [. . .] not only misinterpreted international law, but also intentionally violated China's domestic law and *deliberately humiliated China*'.<sup>109</sup> In other words, underlying the rhetoric of security imperatives, feelings of national humiliation drove Beijing's assertion of maritime territorial control.

Whether intended or not, the Obama administration's strategic response to China's (perceived) assertive rise and US allies' increasing demands for reassurance, the so-called 'pivot' towards the Asia-Pacific greatly reinforced this emotional downwards spiral. Authoritative figures designated the shifting of 60% of US naval and overseas air force assets to the Pacific, and the US countering of China's alleged<sup>110</sup> Anti-Area Access Denial strategy (A2/AD) with the Air-Sea Battle Doctrine, as the work of 'the invisible hand behind the rising tension in the South China Sea'.<sup>111</sup> They also saw the policy papers on twenty-first century Seapower, the National Security Strategy, the National Military Strategy, and the Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy, all released in 2015, as further proof that US wants to 'make China pay the price', and warned against a future Sino-US conflict. The disputes in the South China Sea, they emphasized in a display of solipsism, emerged because China 'as the biggest victims of the Japanese militarism and one of the four major victors in WWII' had not been invited to the 1951 San Francisco Conference by the US. Although 'China is growing into a strong country', they went on,

the painful memory of history is not long gone. The Chinese people have not forgotten that [. . .] why the Chinese people and government are very sensitive about anything that is related to territorial integrity and would never allow such recurrence even if it's just an inch of land.<sup>112</sup>

The July 2016 award of an arbitral tribunal further deepened China's isolation. Although the judges' legal clarification of 'historical waters', 'island' and the coastal states' responsibilities to protect the marine environment are of general relevance, the Philippines' filing of the case against China meant that Beijing was singled out as the main culprit flouting international standards of behaviour. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately declared that the award 'is null and void and has no binding force'<sup>113</sup> and that it had resulted from political manoeuvring.<sup>114</sup> The state-guided press expressed indignation and outrage.<sup>115</sup> Scholars and decision-makers in Beijing

were convinced that, between 2009 and 2013, the US had been manipulating the issue ‘behind the scenes’<sup>116</sup> and thereby led the Philippine government turn to arbitration to shame China.

In short, the emotional action-reaction cycle around maritime territorial disputes ensures that China remains caught in the ‘trauma time’ warp: Referring to late 19th and early twentieth century international politics, the editors of the authoritative *China Daily* reassured ‘Westerners’ that ‘they have underestimated China’s determination to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity’, that ‘the days have long passed when the country was seen as the “*sick man of East Asia*”, whose fate was at the mercy of a few Western powers’, and that ‘It is naive to expect China to *swallow the bitter pill of humiliation* from this orchestrated attempt to run roughshod over it’.<sup>117</sup> Put differently, the Chinese inability to communicate the meaning of the twentieth century’s painful experiences, both domestically and internationally, makes many of its leaders see twenty-first century maritime politics through the solipsistic lenses of China’s incessant and solitary struggle against the ‘Western’ world.

## Conclusion

International hierarchy centred on the Euro-Atlantic ‘West’ and its allies mandates and nurtures China’s drive to ‘catch-up’ through rapid economic development and military modernization until the present day.<sup>118</sup> Paradoxically, China’s developmental success and attempts at escaping the warped ‘trauma time’ have been accompanied by an increasing emphasis on China’s national humiliation, both, in the past and in the present. Against this emotionally laden background, China’s expanding interests in East Asian seas and US-led responses, prompted increasingly insecure Chinese decision-makers to secure the South China Sea and embark on land-reclamations of unprecedented scale. Incapable of connecting their expansive maritime claims with the reactions of weaker neighbours, Chinese leaders strengthened their assertions of China’s enduring ‘peace-loving’ character, of a China that, during its 5000 year history ‘never engaged in colonialism or aggression’.<sup>119</sup> Instead of seeking compromise in territorial disputes, a deep sense of being misunderstood prevails in Beijing. The 2011 white paper on China’s Peaceful Development, for instance, states in an almost pleading tone ‘we sincerely hope that the international community will [. . .] support rather than obstruct China’s pursuit of peaceful development’.<sup>120</sup> President Xi Jinping too, in unusually clear wording, noted that Chinese leaders faced ‘prejudices and misunderstanding’ from those who ‘view China through coloured glasses and believe that China will inevitably become a threat’, and ‘even portray China as being the terrifying Mephisto who would someday suck the soul of the world’. Such ‘absurdity’, he pointed out, ‘couldn’t be more ridiculous’.<sup>121</sup>

Hence, the action–reaction cycle of expanding maritime claims and international condemnation and isolation has established an emotional structure which perpetuates the Chinese people’s need to make sacrifices for achieving a particular kind of a better future, and to do so under the strong leadership of the Communist Party. In line with Fierke’s elaboration, the experience of social traumata created the conditions for Chinese leaders to mobilize the solipsism of the group.<sup>122</sup> Thus, international hierarchy, as it props-up domestic hierarchy, has not helped people in China to gradually address, or ‘encircle’ as Edkins calls

it, the traumatic memories of past violence.<sup>123</sup> This is problematic because when individual isolation and fear is ‘given meaning in the transcendent state which would avenge past humiliation’, the potential for the nation to embark on a ‘messianic mission’ increases.<sup>124</sup>

For now, continuing economic development and especially ‘Western’ recognition of China as a new force, as a competitor, rival or even as a threat, ensures the linearity of China’s ‘rise’ and rejuvenation. Beijing’s enthusiasm for a New Type of Great Power Relations and its engaging in a ‘gentlemen’s competition’<sup>125</sup> with Washington is as much testimony for this, as President Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>126</sup> Because the BRI safeguards jobs through the export of excess capacities and places China above less developed Asian and African countries while linking it to the European ‘West’ – also in the geopolitical cartographic imagination – is suitable for reducing China’s ideational isolation and alleviates the lingering danger of solipsism. Since overcoming ‘national humiliation’ remains a task as arduous as creating a ‘moderately well-off society’, however, the dictum that ‘history if not forgotten can serve as a guide for the future’<sup>127</sup> should be taken seriously. The question is of course what histories shall be forgotten, and whose histories shall be remembered so as to avoid violent pasts repeating themselves.


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### Notes

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